Crooked Roads

Poetry
by
Rick Anderson
Crooked Roads

This is a book of poetry written during my incarceration in the Sterling Correctional Facility in northeastern Colorado. Each is my own reflection of personal experiences and some of the people who’ve participated in them. Hopefully you’ll recognize some of your own stories.

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Earthen Dreams

I dig my hands into the dirt
scratching my fingernails full.
After sifting through the clods
I bring my palms to my face.
The rich aroma of the soil
smells like life, like freedom.
I rub it into my clothing
so as to keep it with me all day.
I want that smell to be there
to remind me I'm still alive.
I want - I need - to know
I still have a place
in the Mother's knowing design.

Memories rise of summer nights
lying in alpine meadows
wondering at the immensities
of a seemingly endless Milky Way.
I recall the echoing call
in a lonesome wolfsong
as I stood on a rocky ledge
atop the Continental Divide;
the icy, clean refreshment
of clear mountain spring water;
the vibrancy and aromatic delight
of tundral wildflowers in spring;
the shadow of a soaring eagle
floating across an open meadow;
the taste of wild raspberries
and the soul-piercing silence
the thunder of my footfall brings
into the transcendent sanctum
of a dark, deciduous forest.

She gave me everything
a simple man could need
yet I often overlooked,
took for granted or discarded
her precious gifts.
In my haste to find tomorrow,
for the next best thing,
my perspective blurred.
I lost my way.
An old man now, dispossessed,
I dream these earthen dreams
of better days and better ways
when I walked tall and free
in the Mother's high grace.
Postcard Confessions

I don't mind that you're staring.  
I know my scars frighten.  
Looking in mirrors used to scare me too  
but I don't mind anymore.  
Not anymore.  

It's alright to look,  
they can't hurt you.  
Glance over these mementos,  
these strange trophies,  
marking those times, places and people  
that made me stand stronger,  
that took me to the ground.  

I wonder what you see.  
Does this jagged slash  
along my jaw line  
remind you of the markings  
on an old treasure map?  
Is the wreckage on my neck  
an exotic hieroglyph?  
Are the webworks of my eyes  
the ingenious graffiti  
of an artisanal hand?  

Your imaginings could be true  
yet If I'm to be honest  
they're just crumpled postcards  
faded by the passing of time  
and blemished by rough handling  
or grainy, oft-visited snapshots  
collected over the years  
traveling dusty washboard backroads,  
within bustling concrete mazes  
and riding rickety, old barstools.  
I hear their silent cautionary tales  
of impulse and reaction,  
of skirmish and liaison,  
along the zigzagging byways  
of impetuous existence.
They come back to me still
in the everyday reflections
of glass and mirrors
though most often in judgmental eyes.
Each bears a single common message:
‘Return to Sender’
Nobody wants them.
They’ve already enough of their own.

You can look, if you want, though.
I hope you will...want to.
I won’t mind.
The Timekeeper's Eye

The mirror serves
an unforgiving
timekeeper
Each passing second
he deviously allows
another detail
another aspect
A new mosaic
grows minutely

The mirror throbs
with the pulses
of the timepiece
Refractions framed
the montage coalesces
into a whole
the image complete
a complexity
now uncomplicated

The mirror cracks
The image transposes
into an intricate
puzzle of moments
Labyrinthine
webworks
woven abruptly
An existence
in disruption

The mirror crashes
Slivers scatter
dispersed into
fractal reflections
of what was
The Timekeeper
amused and patient
boasts an infinity
of mirrors
Perspective

Introspective, yet aware, I drift
among the windswept aspen groves
and rocky treeless meadows
on a blustery fall morning.
The quakies sing out
their seasonal harmonies
on each swirling mountain breeze.
Transient cries through denuded limbs
and rattling parchment leaves
foretell an ominous onset
of another long, cold winter.

An eerie whistling guides me
to a ramshackle outpost
concealing a long-abandoned,
abyssmal, manmade grotto.
A frayed steel cable
hangs from a rusted pulley
vanishing into the dark void;
forbidding, dark, dangerous.
Shrieking phantoms trespass
through shattered windows,
howling among the rotting rafters.
They awaken my imaginings
of an age long past and of souls
the glory hole has claimed.

The trees thin then disappear.
I find myself at the edge
of a century-old necropolis.
Disconsolate whisperings
assail me as I walk past
the shrines and headstones,
storytellers of harsh existence
and abbreviated lives.
A mournful visage of suffering,
of loss and tragedy
transfixes my thoughts.
My soul aches under the
relentless onslaught to my senses.
The spectral guardians bid adieu
as I depart their solemn outlands
to enter a dark, green alpine forest;
the air crisp in its still depths
under the scent of evergreen
and its own soothing voices,
the voices of serenity.
As I pass through the tree line
onto the barren tundra above
I step into a sublime open-air cathedral
of soaring, snow-capped spires.
My wonderment is cocooned
within nature's timeless embrace.
My spirit is cleansed, rejuvenated.
I am whole again.
A Moment

The sand was damp and cool between our bare toes on a breezy southern beach that overcast dawn in fall.
Your fingers mixed with mine, a warm, unspoken comfort radiating between us.
The wind gusted, blowing your hair across your face, covering your lips and one hazel eye.
Casually you tucked it away behind your left ear and tilted your chin into the oncoming wind, your eyes closed, faintly smiling.
I couldn’t look away.
As it always did, your beauty stole my breath.
You wore your love so well.
We were twenty then and blissfully naïve.
Bus Rider

A wild-eyed prophet
evangelizes doom and gloom
to a transient congregation
enraptured by his bullshit
and hypocrisy

Snickering teenaged hipsters
point and whisper in ignorance
Ages-old truths are revealed
with cynicism and disappointment
Youth is so wasted on the young

An attractive executive princess
animatedly texting on her smartphone
notices me noticing her
Her disdainful grimace
steals away her beauty

A laughing young couple leaps on
just ahead of the closing doors
Intertwined hands and lovesick eyes,
they're oblivious to the world
Smiling memories wash over me

I'm almost invisible in the back
That's the best place to sit.
They can't help themselves
so I watch and listen
A societal historian

People get on, they get off
telling story after story
Countless unwitting muses
for the endless pages of a mystery
no one but me will ever read
The Ghosts Are Laughing

Within the bony armor
of this disordered mind
ticks a callous timepiece;
a ruthless agent of judgment
there to punish, to remind.
Like slowly dripping water
its monotony is unrelenting,
straining the thin threads
suspending my desperation.
Its claw-like hands reach out,
slashing honed razors,
each tick slicing deeply
into my tenuous sanity.
Teetering over the edge
I topple into affectless isolation
and the refuge of memory.

I try but can’t remember
that one last moment
of contented silence,
that perfect frame of
simple, sweet stillness.
And I can’t always discern
realities from fantasies,
or truths from imaginings,
inside my mental carnival.
Confused and perplexed,
I ask the questions aloud
but the ghosts only laugh.
They already know the things
I have yet to learn
in the hardest of ways.

Inevitably I will learn
- I am learning -
that being alone,
being lonely always,
being nothing forevermore
is a burden far greater
than I have ever known
and I cannot bear it.
So, like the ghosts before me
I will dream of The Boatman
and passage into the void
to surrender myself
unto the Timekeeper
and beg him to stop the clock.
Mountain Suite

In the cool depths of a dark alpine forest;
among magnificent peaks and towering spires;
along serpentine waters and deep, crystalline lakes
are myriad interwoven elements of sound:

the whirring wings of a hummingbird,
  shadowing solo of the mockingbird,
  a tantalizing aria of a meadowlark;

the relentless, prosaic droning
  of a million flying mosquitoes,
  a single buzzing bumblebee;

the quaking lament of an aspen grove,
cool breezes chanting within the willows,
  hymnal rumors among sere grasses;

bighorns clattering on high, rocky crags,
heavy footfalls of a foraging black bear,
  antlers thrashing in the fall rut;

the tell-tale tapping of a woodpecker,
  incessant prattling of a scolding squirrel,
  the choral honking of migratory geese;

the wolves haunting moonlit requiem,
  a bull elk’s echoing serenade,
  the confessions in a coyote’s cries;

the raptors shrieking mid-flight clash,
  the piercing screams of a cougar,
  dying squeals of a wounded rabbit;

rhythm of torrential rains and pounding hail,
  a whip-like report of a lightning strike,
  the booming crescendo of rolling thunder;

the turbulent howl of a raging blizzard
  blasting through canyons and crevasses,
  ravaging scree slopes and ravines;

the deafening rumble of an avalanche,
  staccato rumble of boulders over talus,
  the furor of a surging flash flood;
a descending brook's hypnotic medleys,
perpetual chorus of a downstream plunge,
the low grumbling of high, falling water;

the silence of a softly falling snowflake,
a newborn fawn trembling in high grasses,
spring wildflowers opening in bloom.

Hear the music in these mountains!
Exhilarating! Spiritual! Rejuvenating!
Mother Earth's grand symphony!
Buried Alive
with Nathan Ybanez

My contemplative moments
are like motes of dust
swirling in bright beams
burning through the shadows.
Each a thing I meant to do:
a regret, an unfulfilled dream,
a tear, a kiss, a goodbye.
I live in these siren flashes
sucking at them like a leech
growing fat on the suffering.

Time is a terrible circle
closing in on itself,
cutting away at an empty heart.
I search in vain for the moment
I grew so large in my loss
I turned this flailing morbidity
from an illusive future
to a ransacked past.

There's no light here - not really.
These nostalgic pyres
are as meaningless
as tears in the rain.
But things continue to grow
and I claw for my salvation.

Across my Rubicon,
alone in my grave,
beholding only echoes of all
the people I used to be,
I wonder what god
would deem it just
for an old man
to suffer the follies
of an arrogant youth
A Flower in the Burn Scar
with Matthew LaBonte

I see you peeking timidly
from between the skeletal bars
of your bleached bony fortress,
vibrant colors a sign of defiance
in this scorched grayscape.
I hear your silent exclamation
of resurgence and rebirth.

Your seed burrowed deep
as the buck sheltered you
from the raging furnace above.
He must have been fearless
offering himself as sanctuary
to your unborn, fragile beauty
in the face of nature’s fury

He nourishes you still, I think.
His essence feeds your tiny roots
as his spirit rises in your petals
and radiates from your golden eye.
His iron will lives within you,
reflecting in your bright bloom
reaching up towards the sun.

I wonder what you see
from your apocalyptic high ground,
up among the blackened stumps,
baked cinders and ash.
The charred hillside gives nothing
but perhaps you look towards
what will follow as you grow.

This barren charnel floor
will be healed someday.
The Mother will make it so.
She bestows her healing powers
as part of a grand design
that always lives on.
You are the hope she sends.
Insignificance

He sees it now, 
the very moment of it, 
when all the strings 
inside him came apart: 
that moment when he 
began to change into 
what he has become, 
a caricature of integrity, 
weak, detestable, 
vilified.

It began with that smile. 
Soon shared impulses 
rekindled lost passions. 
Subtle intimations led 
to murmured invitations 
then unrestrained rendezvous’ 
grew into all those many secrets. 
Indiscretion was inevitable.

When it all imploded, 
as it always had to, 
he found himself alone 
in a cold emptiness, 
a liminal existence 
where each thought, 
every inclination, 
even memories 
- especially memories - 
became irrelevant.

Secreted now 
in a far-off keep 
of hard stone and steel, 
suppressed by the crush 
of countless killing minutes, 
he has come, at last, 
to understand his place 
in this vindictive world. 
He is less than zero. 
He is insignificant.
Yet a curiosity lingers.
His mind can’t unsee
the million little things
he might have done
to find his way into
a different tomorrow.
While such thoughts may be
austere, morbid even,
Isn’t that human nature?
As meaningless as
a thing may become
everyone
will always be interested
in the aftermath.
The Better Side

I have loved often
in the ways one can love
without being ‘in love’.
Every one was special in her moment,
each a respite from the tempests
of their time and place.
Yet, whether a night or a year,
there was always an endgame to suffer
when the binding ties would begin to fray,
with loss, regrets and sometimes guilt to bury,
and goodbyes, always goodbyes, to endure.
Then the silences in all those spaces
she filled with her voice, her laughter,
her whispers, her breath ... her presence
presses on me, pleading for sustenance,
for the next ‘her’ to complete me
for whatever time she could, or would.
And every step I take into this silence
is one step closer to alone,
into a penitent solitude.

I’m an old man now, forfeit of futures,
a dusty romantic on a tiny island
in an infinite sea of wistfulness.
Just a dreamer, a rememberer
of beauty, of love, of living
on a better side of life.
One of Your Own

Your embrace was indifferent, without warmth or welcome. Your indirect gaze and awkward conversation confused and perplexed me but the anxious silences and sideways glances screamed warnings of change. Your infectious, radiant smile was withheld behind tight lips while your voice, so sweetly musical, seemed to come from another droning truth-less accusations, self-centered condescension, and unfelt placations.

Suddenly it was clear. You were turning me into another unworthy memory. But you had to tell me, make certain I knew, the next Prince Charming had already replaced me. A new fairytale had begun. You would never be alone.

How long would it last: before he tastes the lies disguised in your kisses; before he feels the cuts of your calculating betrayals; before he’s sacrificed on your altar of expectation; before he becomes the next notch on your scarred headboard?

When makeup won’t cover the craters, cracks and creases; when your perfect smile becomes a callous, entitled grimace; when sex can no longer be a weapon of conformance; when the light in your eyes, that beautiful, shining light,
fades into cruel discontent
don't look into the mirror.
The reflection will reveal
what it was to have once been
one of your own.
One of us.
In Wild Places

A scattering of ancient oak, trunks twisted and tortured, hold vigil over the skyline of a pristine alpine escarpment. Ice clings to its granite walls upon whose rocky outcrops raptors make their airy homes. A solitary pine protruding angles sharply towards the sky, a silent, watchful outlier above an expanse of aspen swaying as one in the wind.

Effortlessly rising on warm thermals, an eagle soars high overhead, scanning his vast aerial dominion. Down below, the dark timber shields the forest denizen from the element's hard hand. Here, the tanager, the fox, the deer and the lynx thrive in harmonious coexistence as the ever-observant owl bears witness to this wilderness, archivist to its mysteries.

Far from the imprint of man life continues symbiotically as it was always meant to. There are no laws here for those courageous, no asylum for the meek, no churches for the weak. There are no boundaries nor any instructions. Freedom is a real thing. It is here, only here, in these wild places.
A Night Passing

The early morning call
It's time, come now
I'm on the first plane out
More time! More time!

She's waiting for you
he says, but still
I'm unprepared
when I see her,
the disease ravaged shell
of the woman
who gave me life

I touch her arm softly
so afraid I'll break her
Her eyes open slightly
In little more than a whisper
she allows me
one last secret

The night is long
yet passes so quickly
In the morning light
she barely breathes
I wonder if
she's already left

Her last few moments
will haunt me always
but she wasn't alone
when her angels came
Did she know I was there?

She comes to me at times
She feels so close
yet always, too far away
Terms

I believed
when someone said
"I love you"
they would
love me
forever

but I was wrong

What they
meant
was they would
love me
'until'
Found

There she comes now,
striding through the trees,
footprints trailing in the snow.
There’s always snow here
but she loves the snow.
As she approaches it seems
she’s looking through me
until something pulls her back.
Puzzled, her brow furrows
as she searches for recognition.

I wonder what she sees.
Is it the boy she knew back when
or the scarred, grizzled old man
standing before her now?
Then she smiles,
she reaches out to me.
My anxiety dissolves in an instant,
time fades easily away.
Each and every treasured memory
courses within like adrenaline.
I remember not knowing.
I remember happiness.

Her eyes still twinkle,
her happy, laughing eyes,
as she recounts stories
of a life lived well.
Every time she smiles
her chin lifts just a bit
then dips when she giggles
that wonderful way she does.
She asks if I remember...
“I remember everything.”
She seems so surprised.

Too soon our time ends.
She must return to her world
leaving me to mine.
I won’t be sad though.
If I never see her again
I’ll always have these moments
and a renewed understanding.
She found me in this exile.
She brought her special light
into a fearsome, dark place.
I'm humbled, grateful
for the gift she gave me.
The gift of her time.
She made me worthwhile.
Undertow

Morning breaks within these halls
and time begins again
Each dull day a provenance
of vengeance for my sin
I'm becoming less of who I was
in the life I left behind
There's nothing here to shield me
from the cruelties of my mind

I find myself in ebbing tides
captured in undertow
I hold a lifeline in my grasp
Darkness bids me let it go
My reasoning mind pleads with me
to pull myself to shore
My lowest self is in control
It drags me towards Death's door

Every day the struggle grows
but my grip on life is strong
I won't let him pull me down
to a place I don't belong
So I labor to endure each day
to get through to the night
To lose myself within my dreams
and delay the morning light
Where We Are

Nostalgia will sometimes ask where we would be now had there been anything more between you and me. My imagination will run playing out sublime scenes of laughter, love and joy until reality intervenes.

I’ve burned so many bridges and crossed too many lines on the roads I’ve chosen since our sunny days. I’d only have let you down, pulled you into the wake of my destructive passing, into my inevitable carnage.

I know of your life today. I could’ve never been him, been your reason to smile, always ensured your happiness, or given you all the things, everything, you so deserved. You’ve made me believe in forever because you’ve found yours.

All is as it should be in the end, I know. But maybe, if you don’t mind, I’ll glance in now and again if only to remind myself where you’d be now had there ever been more between you and me.
Invisible

A tattered coat, mismatched mittens
and him sometimes
in the cardboard lost & found box
So many families, so many kids.
When he slipped from their minds,
their thoughts, their view he became
an invisible kid.

A small apartment, empty nights
and him most times.
Being alone wasn't that hard,
being part of many was too much.
True to his nature he shied away.
Withdrawing into himself he was
an invisible man.

But solitude wasn't contentment
for him anytime.
He heard the voices whispering
insinuations and accusations.
He didn't even know his sanity broke
or that no one seemed to notice
an invisible mind.

No coat, a jug of wine
and him now all the time
in a cardboard box under the bridge.
He finally found where he belonged;
a place in the world of shadows
where he could live out
an invisible life.
Unnamable

I slip from troubled dreams
into that half-sleep state
where nostalgia often visits;
that magical time of comfort,
suggestion, even whimsy,
where old realities intertwine
with imaginary tomorrows
and wistful impossibilities
becoming welcomed moments
of felicitous reprieve.

Too soon though
the icy tendrils of awareness
creep insidiously into my conceits,
gripping me as an insect
ensnared in the spider's silk.
With desperate reluctance
I grudgingly submit,
surrendering the illusion.
My reverie dissipates
as fog to a warming wind.

With a tedious resilience
I reach deep into the past,
searching ever further
into a thousand fading yesterdays,
for any resonance of happiness
or some memento of dignified repose,
Perhaps one dusty relic remains,
a recollection secreted away
or some talisman overlooked
worthy yet of remembrance,
to make this day matter,
to let me matter still.

But on every glint of light
a shadow tightly clings,
each joy carries with it doubt,
laughter brings fresh tears,
every kindness births atrocity.
As all treasure hunts do,
mine ends in frustration, anger
and a deflating sense of futility.
Memories only mean something
to the rememberer in the end
and recalling anything alone
is so damn lonely
As an encroaching dawn absorbs me into its obstinate radiance
I recognize it at once.
Anne called it the 'unnamable lust'
but you may know it by other names.
I've felt its dark caress before:
when the rocks far below
beckoned with enticing relief;
in the oncoming headlights
of another night traveler,
and in the stainless steel gaze
of a desolate finality.
But I was naïve, tentative,
not yet so cynical.
I know much more now.

The prospect of a long life
filled with this kind of tomorrow
is much more terrifying to me
than an eternity with the dead,
kindred spirits always near
laying upon me heavily
like a comfortable old sweater
on a chilly fall afternoon.
My thoughts turn to them,
always to them.
I want to know what they know,
see what they’ve seen
when their forever moment
drew them mercifully
into its inevitable embrace;
when their fears and hatred,
pain and worries surely ended.
I want to know what I'll see.
Will they all be waiting,
everyone I loved, wanted to love?
Will I, at last be home?
I can’t really know
until I join them.
Tangents

Poetry
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Rick Anderson
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I: LOVE
Love
is like the ocean
calm seas
and storm swells
low tides
and rip currents
all ending
as crushed
seashell beaches
In youth
love is simple
A pretty girl
coy smile
a little courage
a lotta nerve
a warm summer night
the first kiss
Love
is like the ocean
calm seas
and storm swells
low tides
and rip currents
all ending
as crushed
seashell beaches
In youth
love is simple
A pretty girl
coy smile
a little courage
a lotta nerve
a warm summer night
the first kiss
If you don’t love her, leave but if you stay find a way to love her
Your children bear the costs of failure
We have a secret
you and I
of dark things
in shadowed places
We did it
We enjoyed it
They'll hate us
for it
We'll hate ourselves
and each other
But not tonight
There's a lot of crazy
in there
I see it beneath
your brow
Kindred spirits
are like that
Behind them I watched as her arm encircled his waist her hand disappeared into his jeans pocket He glanced down she up We smiled
She looked
into my eyes
without judgment

She laughed
with me
I remembered kindness

Her fingers
brushed over mine
I remembered living

She smiled
In that moment
I found hope
I search for you
for the imprint of you
whenever the 0's and 1's
of my memories
jumble into nonsense
You're me defrag
my reboot
the keystroke
that restores me
In these respites
she is everywhere
enveloping
with me, around me
in me
The familiar fire
tunnel vision
desire
depth of emotions
with her
intense physical ache
without
She is my everything
When you feel
the light touch
upon your cheek
a warm breath
on the nape of
your neck but
no one is there
think of me
holding your photo
waiting for you
is like holding out
for just the right
raindrop
in a downpour
II: LOSS
I never wanted
you to stay over
but you did

I asked when
you were leaving
you just laughed

Then it was different
You were gone
and it hurt
When you walked away, leaving me far behind did you know I could be a wrecked and broken man yet remain whole?
I didn’t know  
how very much  
I loved you  
until  
you stopped  
loving me
I saw you today
behind the eyes
of a stranger
and I wondered
who
you’d become
where
you were now
and why
you weren’t here
Where have they gone
the small kindnesses
of one to another
a warm smile
a humorous chuckle
an inviting hello
real happiness
I want to recognize
these things again
I gutted this life
with someone
I never loved
for unspoken promises
to those I did
This is the love
of a father
for his children
It's a sad thing
not being
in love with someone
No hand to hold
and no kiss
goodnight
or goodbye
People will come into your life then they will go They always go
Do you hold yourself hostage like I do
or are you kinder to yourself?
Mental flogging seems to be
the only way I can get
my own attention
A butterfly
flutters crazily
thinking a day
is forever
If that was true
I'd have spent
one more
with you
I wonder whose name
I will call out
in the very last moments
when my body
wracked with pain
can fight no longer
Hers . . .
or yours
III: ADRIFT
Red, orange, yellow
Flames on the sunset
Sand rolling in the shadows
Sagebrush horizon
Grass blade tombstones
Lightning-laced steel
Ghostly charades taunting
The concrete wails
I miss those places
where grass is always green
trees grow up crooked
and water is music
I miss those who
walked the meadows
climbed the trees
and sang with me
I miss them all
the moments we shared
the stories we made
I miss everything
Waking in the night
I caught myself
looking forward
to a new day
The meds
must be working
The landscape is different
under the yellow glow
of mercury vapor
Unlike the bright gleam
of moonbeams
or unfettered sunlight
the razor seems golden
with a harvest radiance
A few town lights sparkle
through the galvanized weave
seeming as stars blinking
in a subdued Milky Way
It's almost as if . . .
It is humbling
to understand
the pebble underfoot
has a permanence
I can never know
Memories never seem all that important at the time you make them yet they'll be everything when you can't have what they hold
Blowing snows
through a gray light
implore me
Come out
We need you
Take refuge here
Dream forever
If these walls disappear
they all fall down
and I can take
a thousand steps
in a single straight line
where will you be?
IV: ALONE
Staring into his mirror
he strains to see
what they say he is
Sometimes he
thinks he can
but not today
not this day
and he knows then
he will survive
to endure another
Here, where
the wounded trudge
slowly, hate-filled
hearts still
beating on an endless
barren trail
there is so
much blood
Swallow the pills
Sleep to forget
Wake to regret
Walk with Zombies
Pretend it's not real
Resent every heartbeat
Endure the meaningless day
Try to forget
Swallow more pills
a random thought
a single word
switch flips
breaker blows
right side up
is upside down
the compass spins
where the hell is the door?
I'm scared shi*less
I don't want to play anymore
Solar flares in my brain
melt reason and control
An irradiated black worm
feeds upon what is good in me
then defecates into the lives
of my loved ones
They'll never be free
of my stain
Then realization lands
with thunderous impact
Freedom is a pipedream
the past a charade
the future
another locked room
There is nothing free
always a cost
an expectation to fulfill
I'll never live
free again
Don't suppose I
ever did
I am the man my fathers raised
They are the men who did this
Unmade

It really is a living thing you know, the ice. It feeds, it grows, and it withers then like all things cyclic, returns. Below its seasonal carapace flows its lifefood; the snowmelt and spring-fed waters carrying all life needs to flourish. It constantly rejuvenates itself as well as everything it passes through and upon. It is beautiful, majestic yet treacherous. It will bestow great rewards for skill and prowess, merciless retribution for even the smallest mistake. It has no emotions, no compassion. It isn’t a friend or an enemy. It is indifferent.

Nearly a thousand feet above the canyon floor a waterfall spills over the edge of an overhanging cliff. Well into winter the flowing cascade freezes over becoming a structure, a column of ice appearing to bear the weight of the mountain above. On my approach I marvel at the magnificence of this place, this monument to nature’s energies. I sit for a short rest near its base and take in my surroundings. The ledge above is hidden in a winter squall as is the canyon below but I can still see the streambed cutting through the treeline just past the scree slope under the cliff face. All around me the colors of summer have been muted in this cold season of rest, of hibernation. A blanket of white covers the wild grasses and the boulders, resting lightly upon the leafless limbs of the aspen while weighing down the needled branches of the spruce. It is a pristine canvas on which to practice my art.

I’m close enough to hear the faint gurgle of water flowing below the ice covering the stream beneath the column. It is reminiscent of meditation music; melodic and calming. I can feel my heart rate slowing, the rise and fall of my chest easing. Several songbirds add their complimentary song to the wind and water in this musical suite of sound. There is tranquility in this moment, in this place, enveloped in this white purity. It offers me some sense of what heaven might be like. Then it’s suddenly summer, I’m fifteen and tied into a rope atop a rocky ledge. Luan, my buddy’s older sister is looking at me, smiling confidently, and saying, "Trust me."
Relax. Just sit back." My trepidation melts and I lean back into the open space for the first of so many times.

Finally, I hit the play button on my iPod. As Aerosmith launches into “Sweet Emotion” I step up to the ice. Plant an axe, then the other, kick in a crampon, then another, scan the ice above and repeat up the beautiful, hard ice, in places tinged in green, others blue. The light sheen of water flowing atop the ice mists as it passes over rough patches sending damp caresses across my face, its cold tickle exhilarating. I progress steadily upward through steps, around columns and over bulges on the rounded vertical face of the pillar. The ground slowly recedes until it too is lost in the snowy, white overlay below. I feel suspended somehow, like an enormous snowflake stuck to a ribbon of angel tears. I keep moving, one limb at a time, axe-crampon-axe attuned to the impact of each strike. A solid placement has a sound and feel like a bat hitting through a ball, a very reassuring feel. My hands and feet begin to move in time with the music and soon I’m deep in the dance of sound and movement. I imagine a rope trailing down to my partner and mentor Mark below me on belay. As quickly as it comes the image is gone. What was that? I’ve climbed alone since he blew out his knee last summer and encountered no moments of doubt before. Confidence, and let’s face it, narcissism always carry me through so I give it little thought.

I am near the height of the nearby treetops, about sixty feet, when I feel that other sound, the one no ice climber ever wants to experience; the sharp cracking vibration of ice fracturing! Not the mild hiccup of a slight crack but the loud snap of something tragic about to happen.

Reacting quickly I pull back to reseat the pick in good ice but it proves futile as a dishwasher-sized slab breaks off directly in front of me. The full weight of it takes me across my upper body and peels me off my stance into the thin mountain air. As I freefall under the block my last thought is simply, “Oh shit! This is gonna hurt!” I don’t remember the landing but I’m sure it was quite abrupt.
When I come to it is nearly dusk and seems much colder than when I began the climb. Disoriented and confused, it takes a moment to get my bearings. I'm laying face-up on very rough terrain in some sort of clearing. Ice crystals are sticking my face and neck like little darts. It feels as though glass shards are in my eyes making them water and swell into small slits. I can feel teardrops frozen to my cheeks. I wonder where my glasses are then recall I was wearing goggles due to the snow flurries. Now I'm perplexed. How did those come off? Damn, that won't be good if this snow doesn't let up.

I sense I've lost most of the day to unconsciousness as the meager light filtering through the blowing snow has begun to fade to a dull gray. It will soon be dark and the blowing, drifting snow is beginning to cover me up. The flurries are well past that of a mere squall now, a real storm having settled in on the canyon. My head and neck are bent forward at a hard angle most uncomfortably. I've apparently landed with my pack high up on my shoulders just behind my neck. With great effort I pull myself up to my elbows and scooch myself into a slightly more upright position against the pack. Pain detonates in my back and ribcage with the strain of the movement but I fight through it to gain some small vantage of meager comfort. After a moment to let the pain and accompanying nausea pass I am able to take a look around to evaluate my situation.

The slope below, the entire canyon actually, has disappeared into a swirling white tempest. I can just make out the dark shapes of a few evergreens nearby on either side of me. I'm lying on uneven ice with rocks sticking up underneath me, poking me in the most aggravating places. It appears I've missed all the trees and bushes that may have helped to break my fall and landed on the frozen remains of the falls basin. I can't really tell if I bounced, rolled or anything else oddly gymnastic but at least I've come to rest with my feet below me. I'm facing downhill away from the cliff face with the waterfall somewhere behind me but I've no idea how far down the hill from it I am. I'm sit-laying in a white soup with no real idea how the hell this happened or what to
do about it. It’s pretty obvious I’ve gotten myself into a helluva mess though. I recall my earlier thoughts of a rope and partner, Yup, good idea in retrospect. Mark should be healed up soon so I’ll have to use that idea next time. If he were here I would have only fallen a short way, the protection and belay would have broken my fall and we’d have had a funny story to tell at the bar later about my airborne acrobatics. But I didn’t call anyone so no one knows I even left town. I hear his voice chiding me, “You didn’t tell anyone where you were going did you? Dumbass!” But self-recriminations will have to wait. I need to focus.

I take a few deep breaths and begin evaluating my injuries first. My back is quite painful and I’m certain I’ve broken some ribs. My neck is hurting but I can move it around and my arms seem to be functioning. Headache pains are coming in sharp waves so I reach up to remove my helmet but find it’s not there. I always snap the clasp but it’s gone, along with the headlamp I always keep attached to it. My nose has been bleeding and there is an open wound on my forehead. Maybe the ice block hit my face and head? Then I discover one of the many lumps on my head is quite large and lacerated. My gloved hand comes away with fresh blood so I press it back onto the wound hoping the pressure, combined with the cold, will help staunch the flow. Maybe the cold will also work a little magic on this massive headache too. I know head trauma and unconsciousness mean concussion so I need to try to stay awake until I get off this hill. Having an exposed head and face is going to be a big problem if this storm keeps up. I then discover an even bigger problem. My iPod is smashed.

Several years ago Mark invited me to try this ice climbing thing on a small ice flow popular with beginners. I quickly agreed of course! So now I’m driving my Jeep up Clear Creek Canyon to my first encounter with ice and crampons and such. Melissa is blasting away on “Bring Me Some Water” and my foot is buried into the accelerator. The Jeep is rockin’ and my adrenaline is off the charts. Driving past the ravine I see the successive steps of the ice just across Clear
Creek. This is real! I’m gonna climb up that waterfall! Whoever said youth is wasted on the young was just stupid!

It occurs to me I haven’t noticed any pain coming from my legs yet. Get up and get moving Dude! But when I try to move they do not respond other than bringing an enthusiastic new guest to my pain party! I brush the snow off my thighs revealing bright red blood and jagged, yellow bone through the torn legs of my pants. I’m bewildered for a moment, and then shocked as I ponder the ramifications of this discovery. They don’t yet hurt as badly as it appears they should. A small favor, I suppose. Below my thighs, outlined beneath the snow, I can make out my lower legs and do not like what I see. There are too many angles where straight lines should be. I quickly shift back to what I can clearly see. Compound fractures are protruding through the Gore-Tex about four inches above my knees and blood is still seeping into pools beneath my legs, the edges of which are beginning to freeze. Nothing good is happening here so I decide denial is an appropriate response for the moment and I should just let the snow cover them up.

With nightfall my very limited scope of vision becomes no vision at all. There is no light in this storm-filled darkness. My headlamp may have provided some small comfort. I imagine a family of mice holed up in the shell using the lamp for heat. I let out a little chuckle and the immediate stab of pain in my ribs returns me quickly to the moment at hand. The temperature continues to plummet as night steals what little warmth the earlier light had tricked me into feeling. I wonder if, in this bitter cold and pitch black darkness, this is what it is like in space. Deep, deep damn cold space.

It’s difficult to stay awake but I know I must. I force myself into the comfort of nostalgia to avoid thinking about all the pain I’m experiencing. Strange flights of fancy crash in and amongst each other: old memories; plans for new adventures; people I need to make more time for and all those things on my bucket list I have yet to experience. There’s always time, right? My current
predicament brings some doubt and desperation to that question. C'mon man! This is only the first night! Someone will see my Jeep covered with snow in the morning and send up the alarm. The mountain will undoubtedly be crawling with folks looking for me. A Search & Rescue chopper will be dropping a basket and a nurse-angel will tell me I'll be fine, they got me. So cowboy up!

I'm lost in these thoughts of beautiful heroes when a loud snap startles me back to full attention! My heart races wildly as I strain to find the source over the persistent howl of the wind. My imagination kicks into overdrive as I hear the low, menacing growl of a hungry bear homing in on the scent of my blood on the swirling winds. I'm sure I see angry, glowing red eyes reflecting light that isn't shining and shadows seeming to move where shadows can't exist! After several minutes of "fight as I can't take flight" tension I finally surmise a heavily-laden branch likely just gave way under the weight of snow and the strong winds. I'm not about to become some enraged monster's next meal! I relax a bit but my fear doesn't entirely diminish. When this storm lets up critters are gonna want to eat!

With that heart-pounding illusion gone I'm still left with the aftermath of such an adrenaline rush. My legs have come to life with even greater enthusiasm. My back and thighs spasmed when I was startled causing my legs to jerk and knees to try bending in grating and grinding movements that have set fire to all the damage throughout those lower extremities. I begin now to implore every deity I've ever heard of for mercy! I can't quite comprehend the anatomical carnage it must take to generate this level of agony and any slivers of fantasy I might save myself in the morning light dissolve like raindrops falling on the sun.

The night seems to drag on for a week. The monotony of the blizzard winds and bitter cold is broken only by the continual bolts of pain slashing at my nervous system. I thank those deities, whichever may have heard my pleas, for every single millisecond of relief I am allowed. During
these times I reach for any distraction so I make lists of things. Lists of people I've known, of places I've been, of wins, losses, wishes, misses and so much more. I even make a list of all the bones I've likely broken and add them to the list of those broken in the past. Making all these lists seems to help since my pain begins to level off somewhat. I like to think it is the lists anyway. Then I wonder about the human need to make lists, to keep scorecards. Times like these maybe.

Finally, an opaque light insinuates itself into my coffee black debacle. I can just begin to see the outlines of a few trees near my lumpy pew. It is a pew, I've decided, as I seem to be audience to some great sermon on grandiosity and risk. The lesson is clear but I think the penitence a bit costly. I don't wonder if I'll get to meet the preacher, just about when that might happen. I know he's hiding out in this storm just waiting to see what I'll do next.

Still intensifying the storm has nearly buried me now. Only my head and a shoulder peek from under the snowdrift I'm becoming. My hands were burning excruciatingly as frostbite took them to task but that's gone now. My hair no longer moves in the wind as the blood in my scalp has frozen it into some macabre new helmet. My face still stings in places but most of the exposed skin has become numb, likely frozen, with only my blackened nose, ears and blued lips to offset its ghastly white pallor. As the storms merciless assault continues unrelenting it seems odd how unaffected I am at the thought of so many body parts freezing solid.

Daybreak finally arrives bringing those encouraging thoughts only the daylight can make possible: maybe I can summon the wherewithal to drag my broken-up ass down this hill; maybe someone saw my Jeep and is right this moment coming down the trail; maybe the storm will break and a plane will see something out of place they think to report; maybe this, maybe that. My mind races with delusions of survival. Then my realistic self slaps those thoughts away. Here I am, lying in this remote, isolated canyon, off the trail, far from the trailhead, in a blizzard,
broken, bleeding and alone. I know I'll be lucky if a cadaver dog finds me or a hiker discovers me in the spring when the snow melts off. I again remember hearing that damn rule but now can't quite place the voice. I descend into a well of doubt and despair.

The remorseless jaws of winter continue to feed unimpeded on what remains of my physical and mental essence. I know my sub-conscious long ago began sacrificing limbs to save my core organs. I've stopped shivering and the pain in my legs has been subsiding. My feet and fingers just fill up space inside my gloves and boots now. My vision has narrowed and I can no longer feel anything of my face and head. I begin to suspect so many hours of full exposure to nature's onslaught will likely make dating a bleak prospect in the future.

As the day passes the storm seems to grow even stronger but I don't really care anymore. I wanted an adventure and I certainly got it. Either my eyes are dead or I'm in a total whiteout because I see nothing but white static almost like TV back in the old days late at night when the networks shut down for the day. Yet I still hear those old reruns, those disjointed snatches of memories of adventures, calamities, intimacies, squandered opportunities, discarded possibilities, shoulda-coulda-wouldas, so much and too many. I try to hold onto a few of the best. I know all too well the who's and why's of the rest and do not wish to judge myself too harshly just now. A mixture of transient physical pain, happy recollection, delusional optimism and regret fills my thoughts. But there are also moments of gratitude for the life I've been allowed up to now. Yes, my bucket list is still long but it has quite a few check marks already! If I'd only made it to a more aged place in life. I knew good fortune couldn't last forever but I never expected the cost would be so extreme, so ultimate or come due so soon. I didn't plan to prove her right but Nature will exact her toll for hubris in the end.

What will surely be my last night arrives propelling me into that final darkness. I imagine myself hanging on a meat hook in a morgue freezer, alongside a couple other dudes, waiting to be
turned into dog food or something. We’re lamenting our fate without realizing we are simply
casualties of our own self-absorbed mistakes and egos. In some ways it feels appropriate for
morons like us to go out this way and we seem to be okay with that.

My mind is the last part of me to succumb. Thoughts and memories devolve into random
hallucinations. I’m visited by ghostly spectators both assailing and applauding me with their
jumbled chorus of insults and accolades. I can feel their embrace welcoming me as their voices
dissipate into a finishing stillness. Sometime during these final moments, with the last of me
failing cell by withering cell, I learn what it is to be unmade. In a far-off distance I hear my heart
slowing. My neurons begin misfiring but the electrical chaos and light show within offer grim
solace. My lifelight, once so strong and bright, flickers then slowly wanes. I dream my last
dream as I take in one final, labored breath. Then still, black nothingness.

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